

6 Exercises to Restore Social Engagement Properties of the Ventral Vagal System

Optimal health is possible when we have a well functioning ventral branch of the *vagus nerve* – a cranial nerve that networks the brain with the stomach, digestive system, lungs, heart, spleen, liver and kidneys. The exercises and techniques described below should help most people move from a state of either chronic spinal sympathetic chain activity (*i.e., stress*) and/or dorsal vagal activity (*i.e., shutdown*), to a state of *social engagement*.

The exercises described below can also be used to prevent problems in the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) from developing, and to maintain a general level of well-being.

The Basic Exercise

This exercise is aimed at repositioning the atlas and axis, increasing mobility in the neck and spine, and increasing blood flow to the brain stem.

1. Lay on your back and interweave your fingers
2. Put interwoven fingers behind the back of your head with the weight of your head resting on your hands to stimulate the occipital nerve
3. Look to the right without turning your head
4. After 30-60 seconds, you will yawn, swallow, or sigh – this is a sign of relaxation in the ANS
5. Bring your eyes back to center and then move your eyes to the left without turning your head
6. Hold your eyes to left until you yawn, sigh, or swallow

Neuro - Fascial Release Technique

Use this exercise to improve communication and social skills

1. Test the slide ability of the skin of the occiput (the back of your head or skull) by sliding your skin over the bone to the right and then to the left
2. Very slowly, slide the skin in the direction of greater resistance, and be ready to stop at the first sign of resistance – if you keep pushing after first sign of resistance, the muscles and ligaments will tighten!
3. Stop there and hold that position until you sigh or swallow, because the resistance in the skin will dissipate as it releases
4. Repeat on the other side

Salamander Exercise

This exercise is aimed at increasing flexibility of the thoracic spine (to free up movement in joints between ribs and sternum)

1. Get down on all fours with your head on the same plane as spine
2. Lift your head slightly, then lower your head. Go back and forth to find a position in the middle

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3. Look to the right with your eyes, and side bend your head to the right by moving your right ear toward your right shoulder
4. Let this bend continue beyond your neck to the base of the spine
5. Hold the position for 30-60 seconds and then repeat on left side

SCM Exercise for Stiff Neck

This exercise is aimed at extending your range of movement as you rotate your head, alleviating symptoms of a stiff neck, and may even help prevent migraine headaches.

1. Lying on your stomach, lift your head – bringing your arms under your chest with your body weight resting on your elbows
2. Rotate your head to the right side as far as you comfortably can, and hold in that position for 60 seconds
3. Repeat on your left side

Twist and Turn Exercise for the Trapezius

This exercise improves the tone of a flaccid trapezius muscle and balances each of its three parts with the other two parts.

1. Sit comfortably and cross your arms with your hands on your elbows
2. Let your elbows drop and rest in front of your body.
3. Rotate your shoulders side to side so that your elbows move – when you do this, your arms glide over your stomach activating the fibers of your upper trapezius
4. Repeat Steps 1-3 three times
5. Repeat Steps 1-3 again, except this time lift your elbows and hold them in front of your chest at the level of heart – this activates the muscle fibers of your middle trapezius
6. Repeat Steps 1-3 again but this time raise your elbows as high as you can – this activates the muscle fibers of your lower trapezius

Natural Facelift Exercise

This exercise is aimed at relaxing the facial muscles and leaving a more natural smile in place by improving the function of cranial nerves.

1. With very light contact, brush the surface of your skin at acupuncture point LI 20 (located at the right base of your right nostril); then let your fingertip melt together with the skin.
2. Slide the skin up and down to see which direction presents greater resistance, and then push lightly into that resistance, and then stop
3. Hold at that point and wait to feel it release
4. Next, slide the skin inwards towards midline of your face, and out toward the side to find the greatest resistance.
5. Stop there, push lightly, hold, and wait for the release

Source: Accessing the Healing Power of the Vagus Nerve: Self-Help Exercises for Anxiety, Depression, Trauma, and Autism, by Stanley Rosenberg (North Atlantic Books, December 2017)